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MID-CAREER ACADEMIC WOMEN AND THE PRESTIGE ECONOMY

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Abstract. Drawing on 30 semi-structured interviews with women academics based in London higher education institutions in the UK, this paper investigates the gendered nature of the prestige economy in academia. We explore how mid-career academic women strategise their career development and the opportunities and barriers they perceive, particularly in relation to the accrual of academic esteem. Concept maps were used to facilitate dialogue about career plans and provided an artefact from the interviewee's own perspective. The analysis draws on the concept of prestige, or the indicators of esteem that help advance academic careers, against the backdrop of a higher education context which increasingly relies on quantitative data to make judgements about academic excellence. The interviews indicated that women generally feel that men access status and indicators of esteem more easily than they do. Many women also had ambivalent feelings about gaining recognition through prestige: they understood the importance of status and knew the 'rules of the game', but were critical of these rules and sometimes reluctant to overtly pursue prestige. The findings are valuable for understanding how women's slow access to the highest levels of higher education institutions is shaped by the value that organisations place on individual status.

Keywords: Gender, Prestige, Academic work, Concept maps, Academic careers

Indicators of Esteem

In the run-up to the 2008 UK higher education's Research Excellence Framework¹ (REF) exercise, one of the authors of this article (who was then at early career stage), was required by her university to enter details about research outputs and 'indicators of esteem' in an institutional database. Faced with a long list of fields to enter, with titles such as 'Editorships of Journals', 'International Keynote Presentations', 'Membership of Scientific Committees', she grew more and more disheartened as the fields were gradually filled in with the '0' from the drop down menu. It was hard for her not to think about the profile of her research mentor (who held the title 'Professor Sir'), and the amount of indicators of esteem that would quickly populate his database.

Academic careers are becoming quantifiable in ways that were not imaginable several decades ago. Many academics in UK higher education, and undoubtedly elsewhere, are now accustomed to the constant demands for data about their academic outputs and achievements. Institutional repositories enable academic staff to enter details not just about publications but

¹ The REF is an evaluation of research outputs of academics and the quality of research environments in departments which takes place every 5-6 years and is used to determine government funding for research.

also key performance indicators such as (*inter alia*) editorships of journals, grant income, numbers of PhD graduates, international keynote invitations, membership of review panels and engagement with the media. Job applications and promotions processes now routinely require data to be provided such as numbers of citations and H-index scores. In the UK, much of this metrication has been driven by the REF (e.g. David 2008), in which quantifiable data informs judgements about the value of research.

While some commentators in the higher education literature perceive increasing quantification as part of the creeping managerialism of universities, or the neoliberal agenda shaping the current context, we argue that one of the most pressing issues to address in relation to metrication is its likely impact on the progress of women's careers. International evidence, which we discuss below, suggests that women are slower to gain the indicators of esteem that are markers of successful careers, partially through (as feminist research has suggested) the unconscious bias that means women's work and contributions are not as easily deemed as excellent in the ways that men's work is (e.g. Van den Brink and Benschop 2012). In this research we investigated whether women academics perceived prestige and esteem to be gendered concepts, and whether they felt this might be a factor in career progression.

This paper has been informed by several decades of research investigating why women continue to be under-represented in senior positions in higher education (e.g. Morley 2014; Dean et al 2009; White et al 2011; Doherty & Manfredi 2006). In spite of this, there has been little substantive change in gender inequality in most higher education sectors in the world. In the UK higher education system where this study took place, and in line with many other countries, nearly 80 per cent of professors are men. The only academic category where women are in the majority is part-time, non-managerial roles (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013). There is concern that the proportion of women at Vice-Chancellor level is on the decline (Bebbington 2012), while in 2015 there was controversy when only two of the forty-three mid-career scientists awarded Royal Society University Research Fellowships were women (Royal Society 2015).

Feminist researchers have framed the problem of gender inequality within (broadly) the competitive, neoliberal and masculine culture of higher education (e.g. Leathwood 2017; Morley 2014; Leathwood and Reid, 2009). The problem arguably lies not in individual women's perceived attributes or deficits, but in the 'continuing systemic and cultural barriers to women's progress' (Tessens et al 2011: 653), which of course is complex and multi-faceted. Our research indicates that one of the systematic factors inhibiting women's career progression is the hyper-individualistic reward and recognition processes through which men gain easier access to the indicators of esteem (the 'right metrics') that advance their careers.

Academic Prestige as a Gendered Concept

Research on prestige in academic work proposes that academics are often motivated to advance their careers through the accrual of indicators of esteem, and these indicators greatly influence hiring and promotion decisions (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011). We use the term 'prestige economy' (English, 2005) here to describe the collection of beliefs, values and behaviours that characterise and express what a group of people prizes highly. Within academic work, the prestige economy operates through such indicators as publication rates, first/last (depending on the field) author status, international keynotes and editorial roles. These indicators are mainly associated with research rather than teaching, and the lack of

status of teaching can therefore create tensions for academics who value teaching more than research or those whose roles have substantial teaching loads.

The ‘prestige economy’ to some extent echoes Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of ‘symbolic capital’ (how one is valued by others in terms of esteem). Bourdieu’s work illuminated how matters of ‘taste’ or ‘distinction’ are arbitrarily coded by certain groups of people. The ability to appreciate and access that which has distinction is a mechanism for gaining power in society, and it is indeed men who have the most power and influence in contemporary societies. If we turn this worldview to the prestige economy in academia, it enables us to understand how prestigious achievements and rewards work to favour men and disadvantage women academics.

As we have shown in previous research (Coate & Kandiko Howson 2016), academic women find it harder to access the types of ‘currency’ that advance academic careers, and we therefore consider prestige to be a gendered concept. Research on academic workloads in a variety of contexts has supported this view. For instance, women’s publications are cited less frequently than men’s outputs, women are fewer in number on editorial boards, women are less likely to be invited to give keynote talks, and so on (e.g. Haslanger 2008; Maliniak et al 2013; Wilsdon et al 2015; Mervis 2012). As a recent report in *Nature* about gender bias in the peer review process stated quite clearly: “Women and minorities are disadvantaged in hiring or promotion decisions, awarding of grants, invitations to conferences, nominations for awards, and forming professional collaborations. These scholarly activities are crucial for career advancement and job retention” (Lerback and Hanson 2017).

That gender inequality in academia persists because of bias has been supported through various studies. To give an example from the sciences, Moss-Rascusin et al (2012) conducted a double-blind, randomised study of 127 academics who consistently rated identical applications for a laboratory job as worthy of higher starting salary offers and higher positions if they thought they were from male applicants. In relation to teaching, there has been much recent focus on bias in student evaluations of lecturers, and the evident tendency of students to rate male lecturers more highly (e.g. MacNeil 2015). Although, as noted above, prestige is far more commonly associated with research than teaching, this type of ‘double whammy’ concerning the value placed on women’s contributions in both spheres of activity is concerning, and could impact on women’s access to the few indicators of teaching esteem that exist, such as teaching excellence awards.

In order to better understand how the prestige economy operates, we explored the career strategies of academic women who self-identified as being at a mid-career stage. In considering women’s academic careers and gender imbalances, research has tended to focus on academic women who are early-career researchers (e.g. Cole & Gunter, 2010) or those who are in senior and leadership positions (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2014; Hoskins, 2012; Dean et al, 2009; Doherty & Manfredi 2006; Peterson 2011). Valuable as this research is, it is also important to explore the experiences and perspectives of women who see themselves as being mid-career, particularly as this stage probably encompasses the longest period of most academic women’s working lives. It may often be at the mid-career stage that women are thinking about promotion and leadership, or that they feel de-motivated, blocked or ‘stuck’. As professional women tend to have children at an increasingly later stage, mid-career is also when academic women are most likely to consider having children, and/or to have care responsibilities such as for elderly parents.

The mid-career stage is crucial within individual academic careers for devoting time and effort in accruing indicators of esteem. At this stage, women might be over-burdened with large administrative roles (e.g. programme leadership) which greatly reduce the time they could devote to more prestigious activities (Coate & Kandiko Howson 2016). The prestige economy is a useful tool for understanding the implications of this phenomenon: prestige is often accrued at the expense of other colleagues who need to step in for those who are away at prestigious events or doing prestigious activities, in order to ensure the ‘bread and butter’ work of the department gets done. Recent research (Angervall 2017; Heijstra et al 2017) suggests that this type of work – the academic housework – tends to be done mainly by women. In a similar vein, the placing of value on certain activities over others operates through sets of relationships (Morley 2015). The inter-dependencies of the building of academic careers is belied by the rewards and recognition systems that value individual achievements, as if these were obtained by individual effort alone (and they never are).

Research Design

This research was a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. We were interested in London-based women as we felt they might have more opportunities to be mobile, given the high density of universities within commuting distance (although this was less of a factor than we had anticipated). We had positive responses from sixty women, of whom we selected thirty on a purposive basis to maximise the diversity of institutions, disciplines and mid-career job roles. The majority of women who volunteered to take part in our study were employed as lecturers, senior lecturers, senior research fellows and readers. That a handful of women professors, PhD students and post-doctoral researchers also volunteered to take part perhaps demonstrates the breadth of the term ‘mid-career’.

The thirty women we interviewed were from nine different London institutions, and held a variety of job roles. They came from seventeen different disciplines, with natural sciences represented more heavily than social sciences, arts and humanities. While some of the research participants were from Minority Ethnic backgrounds, most were white, and further research would be needed to explore Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) academic women’s career experiences in more detail. The fact that we had so few BME participants reflects the concerning lack of representation of BME staff in higher education in the UK. The Equality Challenge Unit (2013) highlights the stark statistic that only 2.8 per cent of Black and Ethnic Minority female academics are professors, in comparison to the 15.9 per cent of white male academics who are professors (see also David 2014; Bhopal 2014).

We collected data through concept-map mediated interviews (Kandiko & Kinchin 2012; 2013). These were qualitative interviews that began with a request to participants to map out where they would like to see their career in five to ten years’ time. Concept maps are a method of graphic organisation that can illustrate networks and links between themes. In practice, women drew a variety of visual representations of their future careers, some of which are included in this paper². We then asked women to explain their maps, highlighting what would help them to achieve their aspirations, share any good practices they had experienced, and discuss any barriers they perceived. We also asked participants about what

² These maps are as drawn by participants, who agreed for them to be used for the purposes of research. We have blanked out sections that may compromise anonymity.

was valued in academic life, whether (and how) women communicate their successes, and whether (and how) gender and other social identities play a role. We finished each interview with a discussion of what being mid-career meant to the participants. Interviews were audio recorded with the interviewees' permission, and recordings were transcribed.

Thematic analysis was carried out, drawing on both the academic women's concept maps and the transcripts of their interviews. Analytical codes were initially developed after interviewing was completed. The research team drew on participants' concept maps to create an analytical concept map, which identified emergent themes and tentatively linked some of these themes together. Interview transcripts were then coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software, with new codes being added as they emerged. While coding each interview transcript, the interviewee's concept map was reviewed, given that we invited participants to talk directly about what was on their maps. Codes and analytical decisions were discussed iteratively amongst the three members of the research team.

The process of analysis was intertwined with rich discussion amongst the three authors, especially given that we divided the interviews between us. As we shared our stories from the field, we were struck by how much of the data connected with our own journeys as academic women, and how some of it challenged our perceptions or contrasted with our experiences. One of us was at early career stage having just finished a PhD, one of us was mid-career and pregnant, and one had just moved into the first leadership position she had held. Our individual stories were not included in the data, but the fact that we were all in some way living the research influenced our approach and thinking. It also meant that, in line with Oakley's (1981) seminal work on feminist methodologies, we were meeting the participants where they were, and establishing rapport through shared connections.

Ambivalence and Tensions in Individual Women's Academic Careers

The concept maps that the women drew, and the discussions we had about them, indicated that there is a wide variation in approaches to career planning and perspectives about academic careers. In the sections below, we present the results in relation to analysis of the key (overlapping) themes of ambivalence in relation to the accrual of esteem, tensions between values and ambitions, and the individualisation of academic careers. Although the themes are intertwined, together they offer insights into the ways in which the prestige economy operates (particularly the 'currencies' that matter most), the importance of interdependencies between colleagues, and the particular tensions that are created by the individualistic nature of academic reward.

Ambivalence about the Rules of the Game

The feelings of ambivalence that we found in our participants' comments had previously surfaced in the research of Louise Archer (2008a,b). Archer illuminated how younger academics navigate the contemporary higher education context, recognising that they want to do well whilst at times lamenting the nature of what has to be done to succeed. In the same vein as Archer's participants, many of our mid-career academics revealed the ongoing struggle to advance their careers whilst understanding that the 'rules of the game' in contemporary higher education are challenging.

In spite of the increasingly competitive nature of academia, and the pernicious effects of

metrication, it was still the case that many of our participants enjoyed some of the aspects of academia that have always been seen as desirable (e.g. the joy of intellectual pursuit, and the freedom that comes with autonomy). That these aspects can also bring rewards could evoke conflicting feelings: it is natural to feel pleased when earning rewards, but what if these achievements are part of a system that at times feels morally void?

I derive pleasure and satisfaction and fulfilment from excelling in that [research] which means I'm playing the game in terms of participating in the REF, which I also despise politically. (Bernadette)

Valerie also talked about how she is currently happy, but worries how she would be perceived if colleagues knew she was not craving more seniority and the responsibilities that went with it:

And I feel like by now I'm in a middle sort of position. Now that I am here and I still have many years in front of me I would like to do more. But I feel myself stuck for different reasons. And to be perfectly honest, and not criticising the system but mainly myself, I don't see myself going that much upward in the next five years. Which I wouldn't tell anybody of course. (Valerie)

Many of the women we interviewed had already decided that they were ambitious enough to want to forge ahead to senior levels (in spite of the statistical odds against them), but were not sure that what it would take to get there would be worth it:

Many people of my age, that's 40, reach that boundary where you start thinking, is this really worth it? Do I really want to continue working so hard and being so exhausted all the time? And I see the professors above me, most of them female, working all the time and so the question is, do I want to become like that or not? And it is a point where a lot of women leave academia. (Alex)

The themes of individualisation and ambivalence are clearly evident in Alex's comments above. Again, we would point to how this acceptance of personal responsibility deflects from the interdependencies of academic careers, which can be damaging to self-esteem. As Alex perceives her career progression as an individual choice, she is likely to feel a sense of personal failure if she does not succeed, even though she is statistically unlikely to get to the level of professor.

Wendy's concept map shows her clear intention and hope to become a senior lecturer, then a professor, and eventually taking on strategic and managerial roles. She has mapped out how she will get there (via personal fellowships and a 'crucial period' building an international reputation) and the form and content of her concept map shows clear upwards progression. Wendy clearly recognises the role of others in terms of bestowing value and prestige to her trajectory, echoing again the importance of relationships and interdependencies.

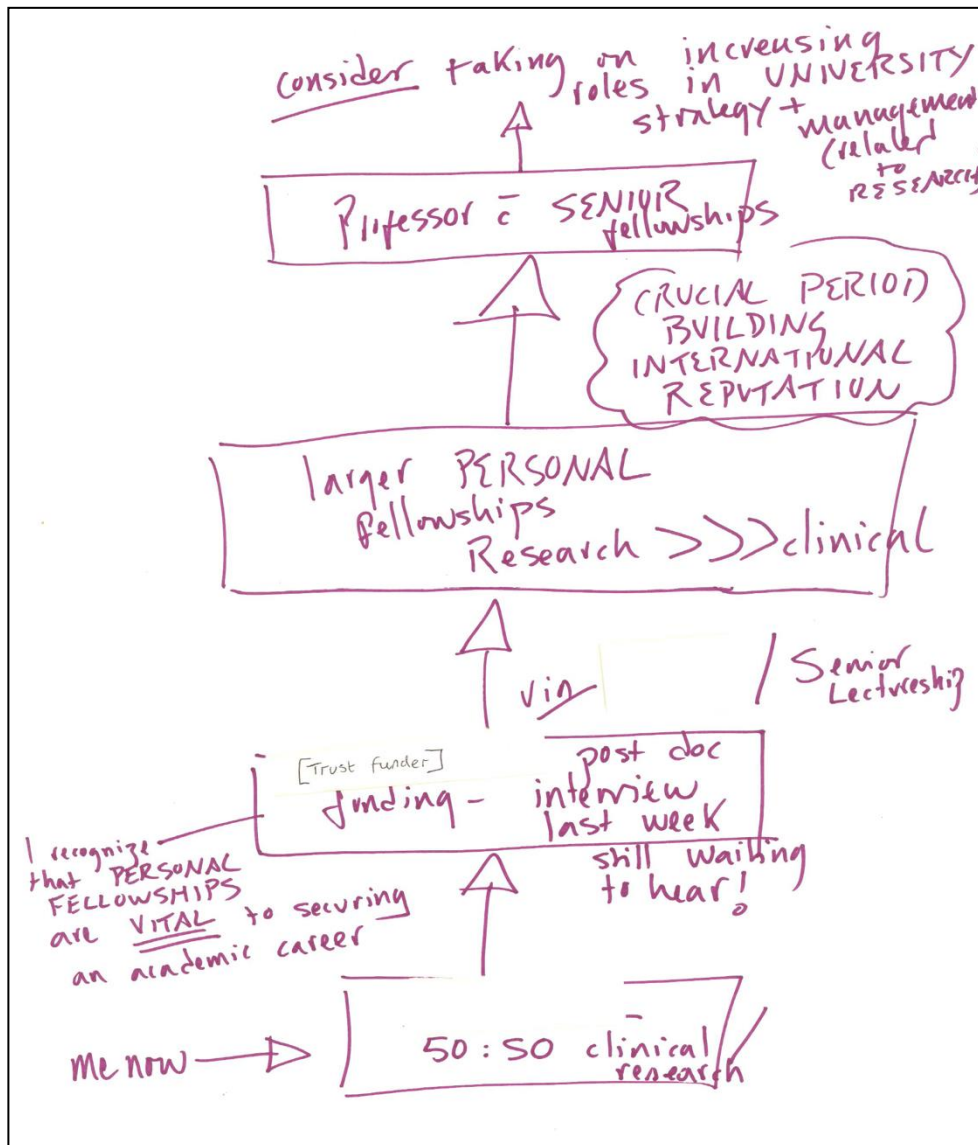


Figure 1: Wendy concept map

Wendy's type of strategic planning might be admirable, but it often generated feelings of ambivalence as well. Some of the women who had clear career goals and pathways seemed almost to apologise for, or downplay, their careful planning:

I deliberately collaborated with people abroad and published papers with overseas collaborators to show international reputation and collaboration. I deliberately went for a large lecture course to the core of the students... I suppose it was strategic. Well, not that much, you know... it's rushing to juggle everything, really. (Beth)

Perhaps being a strategic and ambitious planner sits uncomfortably with other aspects of gendered and professionalised identities. We found that most of our interviewees were ambivalent about behaviour that might be seen as self-promotion. In addition, there may be conflicts between strategic career planning and the desire to work in more collegiate ways, which can again invoke feelings of ambivalence about what needs to be done to progress.

Tensions

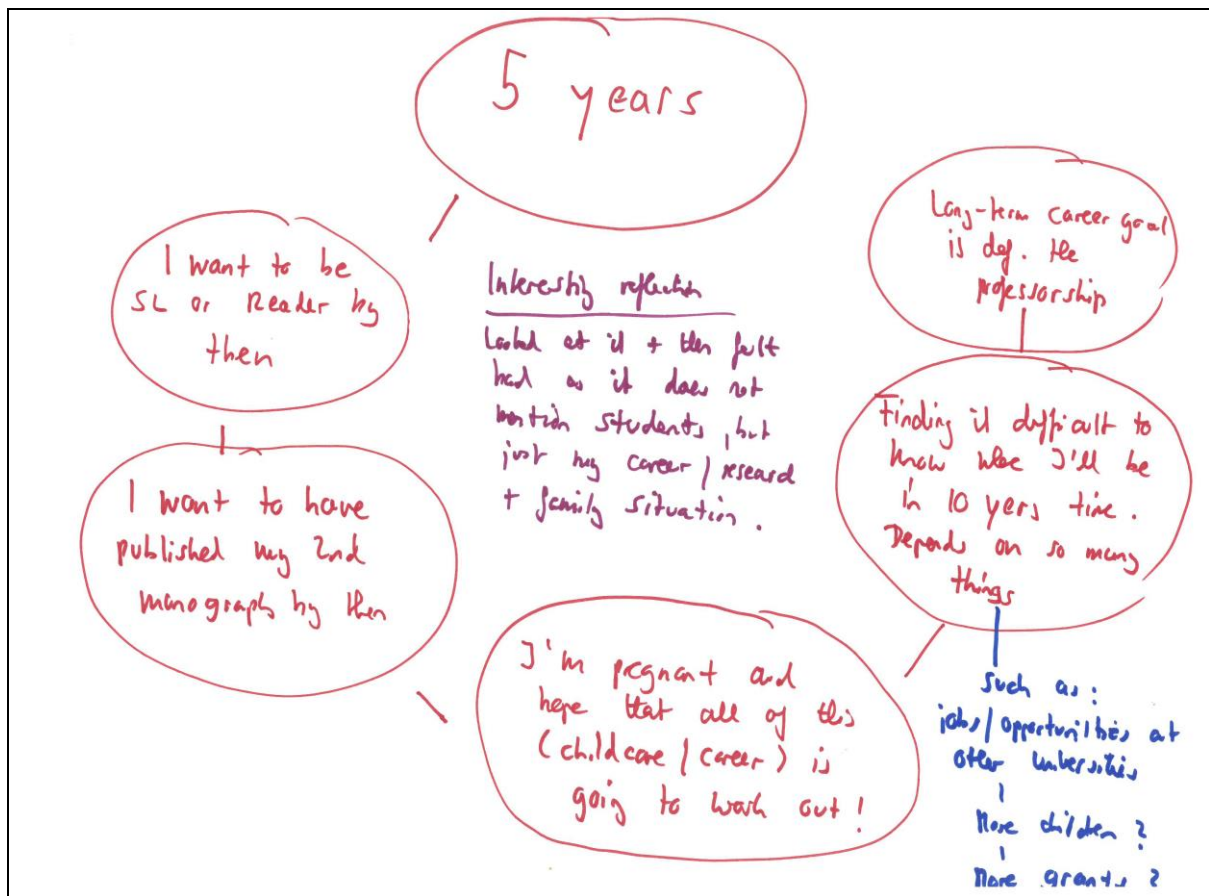


Figure 2: Bernadette concept map

Bernadette's concept map (Figure 2) is similar to Wendy's in that it shows an intention to become a senior lecturer and then professor, via a clear route of publishing and grants; however, its form and content are less assured, more circular and reflective. The tensions that she obviously feels between the pressures of academic careers and her personal circumstances were not uncommon across our sample:

So, in five years' time, I want to be senior lecturer or reader.... Big news is I'm pregnant... I hope that all of this is going to work out, childcare and career and so on... I'm finding it difficult to know where I'll be in ten years' time, it depends on so many things; whether I'd have more children, whether I get more research grants. And long term career goal is definitely the professorship. (Bernadette)

Bernadette's map and discussion seem to signal some discomfort around the notion of being a good career planner; after fluently charting her intended progress, she paused, looked at her map, and added a poignant reflection on the ambivalence she feels about potentially neglecting students if she pursues a research career. The 'Interesting Reflection' she added in the middle of her map states: 'Looked at it [the map] and then felt bad as it does not mention

students, but just my career / research and family situation’.

Some women did not feel able to do what they felt they needed to for promotion to be a possibility. Nina described being so busy with teaching that she does not see how she will get ahead.

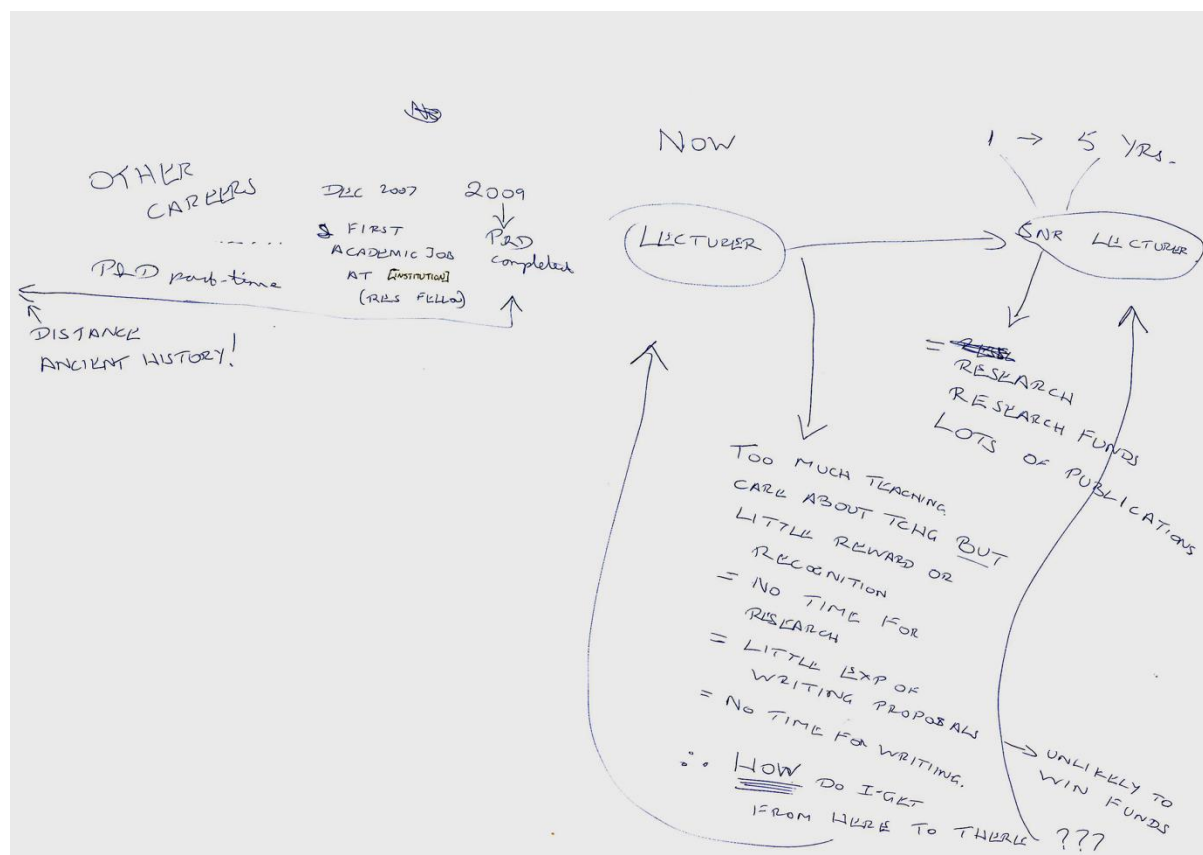


Figure 3: Nina concept map

Nina’s map includes reflections on how she recognises that her love for teaching will not be rewarded, whereas ‘LOTS of publications’ will. This acknowledgement of the tension between what Nina values and what is rewarded was common across our sample. Academics are increasingly required to be entrepreneurs and to measure and prove their progress against varying goals (Ball 2012).

This trend was confirmed by an anxious feeling amongst some interviewees that the goalposts keep moving; that what is valued by certain institutions is not consistent, but changes frequently according to economic and policy factors:

One year they’ll say they value bringing in research money, but then if you bring in research money they’ll say, ‘actually what we value is bringing in students’, and then if you bring in students they’ll say, ‘actually what we value is publications’... What I value is being a good teacher, doing solid research, but... I don’t think that’s valued here. (Abby)

The desire to hang onto activities and contributions that do not ‘count’ in the contemporary

higher education context was also expressed by Elaine:

I spend a lot of my time talking to people... writing reports for governments, doing advocacy work... And that doesn't count. I don't get a publication out of that. I don't get grants out of that. But to me it's the most important thing, because if we're trying to achieve the goal of providing services for people that don't have them, that is the most important thing to do. (Elaine)

It was clear that a number of women found it frustrating that the types of things that motivated them in their work were the least likely to be the things that receive recognition and reward. Women sometimes had very ambivalent feelings about prestige and reward, and wanted to be engaged in meaningful activities:

It's a bit odd because I am quite ambitious in many ways but I don't want to just have status for the sake of it. I can't see the point. (Olivia)

The tensions that our participants felt between what they valued and what 'counts' makes career planning difficult: is reward and recognition worth sacrificing activities that are valued? The fact that these tensions are experienced on a personal, individual level creates further anxieties, as we go on to discuss.

Hyper Individualisation of Academic Careers

The highly individualistic nature of academic careers, in which individuals feel personal responsibility for their own success or failure, arguably detracts from the fact that no academic activity is the result of one individual on their own. As we have suggested throughout, all academic work is inter-dependent on others (Morley 2015), and yet careers are perceived to be an individual matter. As Fiona said:

The question is: do you go for the professor route where you're staying research active or do you go down the management route? And I think that is the decision that gets made at this stage. And I'm really keen that I make it, rather than it just happening by default. (Fiona)

Fiona's ambitions are set out as a matter of a personal decision only, in a similar vein to other participants. However, as she possibly inadvertently acknowledges, careers are shaped by social relations. Therefore, she recognises that it is possible that a non-decision will still result in the actions of others around her 'deciding' for her.

For other women, whose approach to career planning had been less strategic, their reluctance to engage in career planning meant that they had not been promoted as quickly as they might have been capable of:

I didn't bother applying for academic promotion for a very long time. I always used to think it doesn't really matter whether I'm a senior lecturer, a reader or a professor. It's the quality of my work that matters ... And then only latterly it occurred to me... that I should have been promoted a long time ago. I was going to meetings where I would be the only person on the panel who's not a professor... And when I did the promotion to Reader I realised that I probably met the criteria quite a bit previously.

(Yvonne)

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the interviewees drew concept maps that suggested a lack of clarity over career plans, even feelings of confusion and frustration. Our interviewees expressed very personal, individual emotions about their own progression, and some claimed to lack any form of mentorship and/or little help with career planning from more senior colleagues.

The word 'stuck' came up in several accounts, and this extract from Pat's interview gives a flavour:

I took the senior lecturer's job, which I've loved ... it's a permanent contract, I do like that mixture of teaching and research... it is relatively easy to get to and having to be home to do the dinner and pick them up from after school clubs... I think I always thought maybe I've missed out on something because there's a necessity to stay in the job and I see colleagues moving around doing other things, and I do feel like I'm a bit stuck here. (Pat)

Again, the implication of Pat's comments is that she feels her individual, personal circumstances may have held her back. The lack of support for mothers in higher education is well-known (e.g. Ward & Wolf-Wendel 2004), as is the lack of support for any member of staff with care responsibilities (Lynch 2010). Yet again, though, the disadvantages that structural barriers erect are still largely perceived as individual failure.

The other main way that some participants described getting 'stuck' was through doing the academic 'housework' (Heijstra et al 2017), as Amanda suggests:

Where do I see myself being? I think very much still teaching, so not move completely away from teaching, but along those lines with more choice and less the donkey work as it were. I'd like to have a bit more cross school contact and work with people from other schools, to have a bit of influence at higher levels in the future development of [the university] ... And some staff management. So no major ambitions there. (Amanda)

'Donkey work' is never prestigious: therefore women who perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as doing the donkey work are at a disadvantage. However, this work does need to get done so tensions emerge as these activities are often left to women and junior colleagues, who then get 'stuck' which reproduces gender inequalities.

Intersectionality

Ethnicity, 'race' and background are also likely to affect how experiences and achievements are valued. Paying attention to multiple forms of identity through an intersectional approach is therefore important (Crenshaw, 1991; Berger and Guidroz 2009; Bhopal and Preston 2012). This conceptualisation reflects a perspective of universities as highly complex sites where multiple and intersecting spheres of 'difference', including culture, ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status and language interact.

It is often assumed that the lack of value given to the achievements of women and people from ethnic minorities relates to a lack of self-promotion. However, our findings echo other research that suggests a reluctance to engage in self-promotional activities can be cultural (see Scharff, 2015). Lara described her ambivalent feelings about self-promotion, clearly linking these to cultural factors:

It's like, don't boast about it, you know... it's kind of, like, that British mentality, isn't it? You know, let's not shout about how great we are. (Lara)

Janeru also felt that cultural factors were inhibiting:

Japanese women are brought up to be modest, but in the academic world you have to present [that] you're very good, which I'm not really good at doing. So to say I'm reasonably good, I have to achieve much more. (Janeru)

Janeru recognises the cultural challenges, and yet still persists in individualising the problem ('I' have to achieve). Another interviewee, Haruka, delineated a clear pathway to progress to a level of a senior researcher that includes the publications she feels she has and needs to produce, but she noted her reluctance to share her success, which hinders her achievement. For Haruka (and others in our sample), lack of self-promotion and career progression is simply perceived to be an individual failure.

Critical discussion

Over the past few decades, what 'counts' in higher education in terms of academic careers has become more and more tied to metrics and indicators. In addition, the value of 'lots of publications' as mentioned by interviewees is part of the metrication of higher education and could be questioned for the value it actually produces, especially when it comes at the expense of care for students and advocacy work in society.

Recent research confirms what we have found in this investigation: that women academics are more likely to take on the 'drudge work' or 'housework' of the department (Angervall and Beach 2017; Heijstra et al 2017), which are neither prestigious roles internally or the types of positions that allow for the external networking and reputation building that shores up a prestigious career. Indeed, it is those doing the 'housework' who enable other academics to pursue externally-oriented prestige. Our research shows that women are aware of what is prestigious but many individually value outcomes from collective activities such as teaching, supporting students and managing research labs, and thus take personal responsibility for their career progression (or lack thereof).

The phrase 'not criticising the system but mainly myself' that emerged in the research is telling: many women we interviewed seemed at some level to accept that they knew what was required, and perceived it be a personal and individual decision to either play or not to play by the rules. Yet we would argue that being critical of oneself for the decisions taken in career progression deflects attention from the criticisms of the system that are arguably needed.

This research highlights the tensions and complexity in going beyond the individual to focusing on tackling structural inequalities. This includes acknowledging that more thinking

needs to be done on how to ensure women are not seen as responsible for their lack of progress, particularly to the most senior levels. Leadership positions are not the only 'success' and that inevitably most academics will not be in professorial or leadership positions in the current structure.

What we would call the hyper-individualism of academic careers also exacerbates the sense of having to be ambitious and strategise, and to pursue prestige. Our research showed that some women struggle to find value and meaning in these pursuits, and perceive this as a fault of themselves rather than the system. This individualisation reinforces the belief that it is the responsibility of the individual as to whether progression is achieved or not, and downplays the role of structural inequalities and barriers that are related to gender, class, 'race' and ethnicity. In this way, academic careers take an emotional toll that could be alleviated if structural inequalities were addressed.

We particularly argue against efforts that suggest women should become 'more like men' in selling their achievements or taking on more individual-enhancing activities. While women's career development schemes often include an element of encouraging women to be better at self-promotion, some women in our study questioned whether this was healthy for academia. This is a particularly important point at a time when it seems that academia is becoming *more* dependent on cultures of self-promotion, fuelled partly by the metrication of academic work. It would arguably be more helpful to start tackling the ways in which women's careers can be disadvantaged by metrication and the prestige economy, rather than constantly trying to focus on and 'fix' the perceived deficiencies in women.

Much of the work women were immersed with, particularly in the (relatively under-researched) mid-career stage, is the 'bread and butter' activity that keeps institutions functioning. Our research highlighted activities that are essential and could be better rewarded for women at this stage: teaching, supporting students and pastoral care, programme administration and managing research labs. Greater recognition for these activities would not only acknowledge the work that women find under-valued, but it would also address imbalances in the higher education system.

This type of feminist approach could be viewed as part of a political process to challenge the *status quo*, particularly as from many subsequent dissemination events for this project, informal feedback suggests it has been quite empowering for the participants. The final project report for the funder was even submitted as evidence in a gender discrimination court case against a university, which shows that feminist research can have real impact (albeit not necessarily the kind that 'counts').

Conclusion

The prestige economy operates in tangible ways to favour certain individuals, which fundamentally undermines the meritocratic ethos of higher education. We can see this most clearly in relation to the gender pay gap in academia, which in the UK sector is stark: a recent report into the gap stated 'the total salary spend on female academics is £1.3 billion less than it is for male academics' (UCU 2016). The numerous other ways in which women's work is downgraded (e.g. Maliniak et al 2013; Mervis 2012; Lerback & Hanson 2017) should be recognised as a major contributing factor to the slow progress of women's careers. This includes reward and recognition for teaching and support activities within institutions, and

policy and advocacy work externally particularly at the mid-career stage. Until it is, academic women will continue to hold themselves personally accountable for failure to progress as quickly as their male counterparts, and subsequent generations of students will continue to be denied the opportunity to see women in positions of power and authority in universities.

Perhaps if lessons are to be learned, it is important that higher education managers need to be sensitive to the ways in which unconscious bias influences the perception of the value of women's contributions to academic work. Managers should undertake gender analyses of roles and responsibilities within departments, including the 'housework' and student support work alongside research-oriented metrics. Reflection on behalf of managers on how such activities are assigned (or reluctantly taken up) and rewarded would begin to address some of the concerns raised by women academics in relation to their careers. The knock-on effect of slower progress at mid-career stage could substantially influence progression and overall income for decades of an academic career. Alongside this, too many academic women will continue to experience the tensions and possible feelings of personal failure until the activities that they value are also the activities that gain recognition and esteem.

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